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MEMOIR

OF

HON. WILLIAM SULLIVAN,

PREPARED FOR EARLY DIARY OF

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL PROCEEDINGS.

By THOMAS C. AMORY.

CAMBRIDGE:
UNIVERSITY PRESS, JOHN WILSON & SON.
1879.

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Memoir of the Hon. William Sullivan.

William Sullivan (1774–1839), second son of Governor James Sullivan (1744–1808) and Hetty, daughter of William Odiorne, and grand-daughter paternally of Judge Odiorne, and maternally of Dr. Hugh Adams, of New Hampshire, was born in Biddeford, in Maine, Nov. 30, 1774. His father, after his appointment to the Supreme Court of Massachusetts, in March, 1776, removed to Groton, and thence, in 1781, to a house on Bowdoin Square, in Boston, where, resigning his seat on the bench, he again resumed the practice of his profession.

William entered the Latin School in 1781, but fitted for college with Dr. Payson, of Chelsea, matriculating at Harvard in 1788. He graduated with its first honors in 1792. Judge Sullivan, then Attorney-General of the State, had lately erected a house on the corner of Hawley and Summer Streets, in Boston; and, in the office attached to it, William studied law. He was admitted to practice in 1795. Of an ardent temperament, sound sense, and indefatigable industry, he easily took a respectable position at the bar of Suffolk, then comparing favorably with any other in the land for ability, eloquence, and learning.

Soon after opening his office, Mr. Sullivan visited Philadelphia, then the Federal capital, where he made the acquaintance of distinguished personages in public life from all over the country, and also of many that were eminent, belonging to that city or who were leaders in its social circles. Six feet in height, of great constitutional vigor, fine proportions, and

graceful, his appearance was prepossessing; and, with fine eyes, engaging manners, quick wit, and ready sympathy, cheerful and gay, he was everywhere kindly received. The acquaintances he then made, and in 1797 when he revisited the place, ripened into relations of a more permanent nature, and, in some instances, the friendships contracted at this period lasted through life.

In his more immediate neighborhood he was equally a favorite, yielding with due moderation to his taste for social intercourse, for which he was favorably placed, and in which, as may be inferred from what has been said, he was well fitted to shine. But, however great his fondness for society, he never allowed its indulgence to divert his thoughts from study or from attention to the claims of his clients. His marriage early to Sarah, daughter of Colonel James Swan, a lovely and most estimable woman, made success an imperative duty; and his ability, good judgment, and integrity of character inspiring confidence, he gained many friends. He was constantly employed; and, taking great pride and pleasure in his profession, he became one of its leading practitioners, and this, too, among formidable rivals. There was work for all. Troubled times fomented litigation, and questions were constantly arising, novel and delicate. His cases, involving interests of great magnitude, demanded the exercise of all his powers, and for their development were the best possible school. As an advocate he was prudent and sensible in the management of his causes, eloquent and persuasive in presenting them to the jury. The reports show the fulness of his learning and soundness of his reasoning. His argument in the "Jeune Eugénie," in 1821, has been cited to illustrate his mastery of the more subtle and difficult points of jurisprudence. He was, perhaps, a little too far removed from ostentation for the highest success. He shrank from display, and this feeling often chilled his ardor and crippled his strength.

Thus happily constituted by nature and circumstance, equally popular with the legal brotherhood and his fellow-citizens, with numerous friends devotedly attached to him, a large practice of great emolument for every want, he accepted his blessings with a grateful sense of that Providence from which they flowed. His gay and witty correspondence in the intervals of toil, the recollections of intimates who still speak of him with affectionate admiration, his wise and philosophic views of life and duty, thoughtful consideration for others, and freedom from any sordid or selfish aims, compel the conclusion that few lots were happier than his. If his labors were engrossing and attended with responsibility, pleasant intercourse ever at hand alleviated his anxieties and eased for the moment his burdens, and he returned to his tasks with renewed vigor. Others around him might be more distinguished or more affluent; but, avoiding the fatal mistake, to use an expression he occasionally employed in parental counsel, of comparing his condition with theirs, he was contented with his own, and certainly no one was more highly respected or better beloved.

For the first twenty years of his manhood, momentous events crowding the history of Europe agitated the world. Our commerce alternating between extraordinary profits and reverses as extreme, our seaboard cities seethed with political excitement. Governor Sullivan led the Republicans, who, grateful to France for the aid that brought about our independence, favored her policy, whilst the excesses of the Jacobins and despotic tendencies of Napoleon gave strength to the Federalists. William, from his conservative oration on the 4th of July, 1803, stood well with the latter party; and with the affluent merchants and able statesmen who made it respectable, though they were bitter and not very just to their opponents, he was in daily intercourse and on the pleasantest terms. His father, naturally distressed at his defection from his own political faith, and at the terms in

which exceptions had been taken to some of its leading principles in the oration, at first manifested his displeasure by a silence sufficiently expressive. When, however, William sought an interview, and gave his reasons for his course, the previously existing friendly relations were re-established, not again to be disturbed, each generously respecting in the other the right of judging for himself. They both were frequently called upon to avow publicly their political convictions, but alike were too well regulated to indulge in personal asperities.

The ability displayed in the oration, and the confidence reposed in his character, singled him out for political honors. In the House, Senate, and Council Chamber, to which, from 1804 to 1830, he was repeatedly elected, he was influential, and more than once declined the solicitation of his friends to be their candidate for Congress. In 1815, he went with Mr. Otis and Colonel Perkins as a delegate to Washington from the Legislature of Massachusetts, to remonstrate against the war measures of Mr. Madison; but, when they reached their destination, peace was already concluded. In 1821, chosen Speaker with a view to his proposed elevation to the supreme executive, obligations of a private and professional nature compelled him to resign the chair at a moment when universally popular. He was swept thus from the path which might have led to opportunities of usefulness on a wider field. He took too lively an interest in the national welfare not to have been glad to improve such opportunities. He was for many years in command of the Boston Brigade; and, with Judge Shaw, in 1820, prepared the municipal charter.

He had purchased, out of his professional earnings, the estate on School Street on or near the passage from the present City Hall to the Court House, and this he occupied many years for his office. There Mr. Powell Mason, afterwards reporter of the United States Circuit Court, was

his partner. Col. Aspinwall, our late Vice-President and Richard Kidder Randolph, nephew of John, of Roanoke, afterwards of Newport, Rhode Island, were among his students. There and at his residence, 15 Chestnut Street, the central one of three houses given by Mrs. Swan to her daughters, no moment, not due to social or domestic claims, was idle. Mrs. Sullivan was happily constituted, like himself, for genial intercourse. Their brothers and sisters had intermarried with families affluent, social, and widely connected, with Knox, Sargent, and Howard, with Russell, Winthrop, and Amory. Boston had been peculiarly prospered, opulence abounded, its prominent circles were refined and cultivated, and festal entertainments of constant occurrence. He belonged to the principal clubs, among them the celebrated Saturday Fish Club, with Otis, Perkins, and many other choice spirits of the day, and to many learned societies, that likewise met at times socially. His talented associates, interesting strangers from Europe or other parts of the country, were frequent guests at his table. His house was widely famed, not only for its generous hospitality, but for its brilliant intellectual entertainments, in which he took the lead, and to which his children, many of them peculiarly gifted, contributed their part. Certainly there never was a pleasanter home, a more accomplished host, one more ready or able to assume the whole responsibility for the happiness of the hour, or to put his guests at their ease, and bring out what was most agreeable in each.

Naturally eloquent and ready on the rostrum, in debate, or in his forensic efforts, agreeable and brilliant in conversation, he also wrote easily and well. His pen, indeed, was constantly at work. Piles of correspondence, gay or profound, political or philosophical, to judge by what remains, law papers of many descriptions, communications to the press on a variety of topics, heaped up his morning's work, his hand passing rapidly over his paper, hour after hour, unless when,

as frequently, interrupted by the visits of friends or strangers, clients for advice, or brother lawyers in consultation. His publications were numerous. Orations and lectures, his address in 1824 to the bar of Suffolk, of whose association he was for many years President, to the Pilgrim Society at Plymouth in 1829, to the Massachusetts Society for the Suppression of Intemperance in 1832, to the Mercantile Library Association, various pamphlets under his own name or anonymous, among the last several numbers of the "Puritan," constitute but a portion of his contributions in print to our pamphlet collections. In 1824, he published at Keene, New Hampshire, where his nephew, Russell, was settled as a clergyman, a brief history of the United States and of other countries, for use in schools and families. The decease of Mrs. Swan, in 1829, devolved a large inheritance upon her three daughters. After her death, Mr. Sullivan for the most part withdrew from his professional occupations, except where, as counsel of a few corporations or individuals, his knowledge of their affairs, or special concerns of his own, demanded his continued care. During his remaining years, he spent more of his time in his library at home, and devoted himself almost exclusively to pursuits of a literary nature, at work early and late, with a zeal which seriously impaired his health, and probably shortened his days.

Of the works he gave to the press during these last ten years of his life were several volumes requiring a wide range of patient research, and to this he appropriated more than half his twenty-four hours. His "Political Class Book," in 1831, presenting a comparative view of all systems of government, and giving a full account of our own, was translated into French and Italian, and passed through several editions. His "Moral Class Book," in 1833, reprinted in England, was pronounced by one of its ablest reviews the best manual of Moral Philosophy ever prepared for young minds. That same year he published his "Historical Class Book," em-

bracing the history of the world down to 476, the end of the Roman Empire in Italy. He also delivered a series of lectures on the Public Men of the Revolution, published at the time in a volume, and reprinted in 1847, with a memoir of him by his son John, a widely known humorist of unsurpassed versatility of genius. This work, pronounced by a good judge, Mr. Horace Binney, "as a book of greater research and more important historical facts relating to the times than any other he knew," is still in much request. In 1837, appeared his "Historical Causes and Effects," from 476 A.D. down to 1517, when the Reformation first assumed form. That year he published another book, entitled "Sea Life," for the benefit of mariners, in whose welfare he always took a lively interest, and to whose eloquent preacher, Father Taylor, who pronounced him, when he died, the prince of gentlemen, he was an attached friend. He himself contributed to the erection of their Bethel, to the extent of his power, persuading his wealthier friends to larger donations, which they could better afford.

Such a variety of subjects, treated exhaustively within this limited period, bears witness to the extent of his acquirements, his patient industry, and judicious and widely extended research. His manuscript volumes, prepared for the press, but not completed, in a chirography peculiarly elegant and clear, by their numerous notes and emendations exhibit his methods of work. What remains of the third volume of his history, which was intended to cover the period from 1517 to modern days, causes regret that he should not have lived to complete it. Among his papers are found other treatises and such lectures as he occasionally gave the students in his office, of an interest not all of them simply professional. His expositions of the development and operation of feudal institutions will be well remembered by whoever has read them.

The value of his productions, and the reasonable promise of more, from the learning and wise philosophic views they

displayed, attracted attention at home and abroad. As early as 1800 he had been elected a member of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and later he was connected with those of New York, Pennsylvania, and Georgia as Honorary or Corresponding Member. He was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, member of the American Philosophical Society, and of the Academy of Letters, Sciences and Arts of the Valle Tiberina Toscana. Harvard College conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Laws, and he was President of the Society for Promoting Theological Education and of numerous other societies and associations.

Whatever tended to develop trade and the public prosperity found in him a zealous advocate. If abuses demanded reform, with all due moderation he set himself to the task. In the cause of temperance he was among the most zealous, with more faith in persuasion than in legal restraints. His published works were principally designed to inculcate sound and sensible views of religion, morality, philosophy, and civil obligations. His efforts were untiring, as an early and leading member of the Bunker Hill Association, to rear an enduring monument of the principles it was designed to commemorate. Nor was he unmindful, when called upon to deliver the oration at Plymouth, of the steadfast faith and self-consecration which, transmitted to their descendants, rendered possible our political liberties. The influence exerted throughout a community by a few individuals familiar with its history, and thoroughly imbued with the genius of its institutions, cannot be too highly valued, as new generations rise up to be instructed, and strangers flood in for assimilation. His abundant opportunities thus to be of use rarely were passed unimproved.

Absorbed in these engrossing pursuits, his health gave way, and visits to Georgia to recover it in 1837, with his daughter to the Virginia Springs in 1838, and to Saratoga in 1839, proved of little avail. He bore his sufferings with

composure, entertained his friends with his ever cheerful conversation, and was about till within a fortnight of his death. He had come home from Saratoga early in August, when his strong frame finally yielded to maladies rooted in his system by his devoted assiduity to his work; and, on the 3d of September, 1839, he passed away. His remains were deposited in the tomb of his father, near the Athenæum windows, in the Granary Burial-Ground. His widow survived him until 1851. Of his ten children, the youngest died in childhood; the eldest, James, as he entered on professional life; William, Swan, and John are now dead. His daughters intermarried, — the eldest with Stuart Newton, the Royal Academician, and William F. Oakey, of New York; the second, with James Montfort Schley, of Georgia; the third with Hon. John Eliot Ward, our Minister to China under Buchanan; and the fourth with Dr. Crocker, of Providence, Rhode Island. Meredith, the only surviving son, resides in Philadelphia, and four sons of Swan and a daughter in Savannah, Georgia.

A fine portrait of William Sullivan, painted by Stuart Newton, R.A., his son-in-law, is in New York. In King's Chapel, which he attended, and where he was a constant communicant, is a marble tablet on the south wall, erected to his memory by his constant friend, George B. Emerson, jointly with his daughter, Mrs. Oakey, with a profile likeness taken from the portrait of Newton, and an inscription in Latin, part of which we translate. It conveys in concise and apt terms a delineation of his prominent traits. It describes him as "ingenuous, benignant, upright, well versed in affairs civil and military, an eminent lawyer and eloquent advocate, an intelligent and diligent observer of all that deserves to be remembered. Studious of whatever can make mankind more noble, more highly civilized, or truly happy. Amiable, dignified, and companionable, and never unmindful of the most humble of his friends or guests. This marble, that the con-

templation of his virtues may be lasting, was erected by his affectionate daughter and his attached friend, George B. Emerson," to whom so many of these eulogiums apply with equal truth.

Boston may well be proud of her children, when one, able, gifted, and useful as William Sullivan is almost forgotten in the crowd. Eloquent as an orator; vigorous and indefatigable with his pen; throughout his career untiring in his zeal for the best interests of the public around him, of his country and race; an honest politician, with no ambition for office; without pretension, and shrinking from display, — he may well be regarded as the model of what a good citizen should be under free instititutions. Happily endowed by nature, many personal qualities which made him estimable were the result of self-culture and discipline, of well regulated principles and sense of religious responsibility.

Diffident of his own claims, he was too proud to covet honors or responsibilities which did not seek him, or when others were eager to assume them. He may have thus possibly lost chances of usefulness he would have on this account valued more than for any distinction they might have conferred. Independence of character often, however, commands that confidence apt to be withheld when sought, and he had abundant cause, throughout his career, to be grateful for the public and private trusts which fell to his lot. When called to any post of duty, he obeyed, where consistent with other obligations, without hesitation or regard to personal consequences, too glad to be permitted to be of service. Prudent in the management of his own affairs, and economical in his personal expenditures, he was generous to others. He paid large sums, and took upon himself heavy burdens to extricate them from embarrassments, even where the result of their own imprudence, and to his own great pecuniary disadvantage.

In all his private relations, as a devoted husband, affection-

ate parent, and steadfast friend, in fidelity to every claim and obligation, he was an eminent example of what human nature is susceptible in its highest development. His unaffected courtesy, unconscious dignity, and elegant simplicity of manners, are well remembered. His deference and consideration for others, and sacrifice of time and means, of his own advancement or enjoyment to promote theirs; his readiness to instruct or amuse, especially the young; his warmth of heart, generous judgment, and disposition to aid and befriend them in their need, — endeared him to all who came within his influence. That his charities had been without ostentation, was testified when he died by the numbers who had been relieved by him in their necessities who crowded to take their last view of his remains. We do not fear that we have said too much in his praise, but that our effort to recall him as he was may fall short of what justice to his memory demands. T. C. A.